The Religious Duality of the Japanese

(Knowing the Japanese)

August 29, 2025
West Kyushu Mission Station
Masaaki Sasaki

We are Japanese. Therefore, we believe that we know the Japanese people well. Yet, we sometimes assume that simply because we are Japanese, we truly understand our own people—and that is not always the case.

When we attempt to share the gospel with the Japanese, one of the most striking discoveries is their view of God. Even to the Japanese themselves, their understanding of the divine is not entirely clear. Within them exist two distinct conceptions of God, closely intertwined. This might be called a "two-layered" view of God.

The first layer is the highly elevated dimension found in Shinto, the spirit of the Japanese people. It is the reverence for a God who cannot be seen with the eyes, touched with the hands, or even fully expressed in words—a God who transcends humanity. It is the sense of awe before a Being so great that even to call Him "God" feels presumptuous.

Such a layer is always present in the Japanese consciousness of the divine and deeply influences daily life. This God, dwelling in the higher dimension of heaven, watches over our everyday existence and the way we live. Thus arises the conviction that we must live uprightly.

Yet this exalted Being—this "God who is not called God"—is not like the stern, fearsome deity of Western Christianity, who sees even the hidden things. Rather, He is gentle, One who draws near to weak and sinful humanity with compassion.

The second layer of Japanese religious consciousness is found in the world of the *yaoyorozu no kami*—the eight million gods. Here, every aspect of nature has its own deity: the god of dogs, the god of snakes, the god of rivers, mountains, seas, the moon, and the sun. This worldview is what we call *animism*.

In recent years, promotional videos that highlight Shinto-like feelings have become widespread. Almost all of them belong to this second layer, speaking little, if at all, of the lofty and transcendent God. This is the popularized form of Shinto, and it corresponds closely to the biblical worldview. The only difference is in terminology. What the Bible calls angels, messengers, or even evil and unclean spirits, the Japanese have referred to as "gods." Though the names differ, the content is almost the same.

Even in Japan today, one often hears stories of prayers to such deities being answered—illnesses healed, or lost items found. The Bible, too, contains similar accounts. Yet Scripture makes clear that such things are nothing more than fortune-telling or spirit-medium practices, unrelated to the true God. (There is, however, one exception in the Bible, where a powerful evil or unclean spirit is acknowledged as stronger than human beings and thus is called "a god.")

Therefore, the world of the eight million gods in Japan is essentially the same animistic background as in the biblical world. There is no need to angrily denounce it. We only need to understand that it is entirely different in dimension from the Creator God who made heaven and earth.

In the Bible there is a strict distinction between Creator and creation—clearer even than the difference between the person who makes miso soup with a daikon radish and the radish itself. These two can never be confused. Yet in the Japanese Shinto consciousness, such a distinction is absent, leading to vagueness. Thus, many Japanese, encountering the childish notions of the eight million gods, end up shouting, "There is no god!"

And yet, those same Japanese people still value religion and honor a sense of the sacred. Even when they claim there is no god, they do not disparage sincere religious sensibility.

Why is this? Because even those who deny God cannot completely cast aside the lofty awareness of a God-beyond-God. They continue to hold on to it. Japanese people also carry the feeling that God is present in the gentle beauty of nature. Sometimes they even go so far as to make nature itself into a god.

At the lower level of belief, one says that all natural things are indwelt by the eight million gods. But when the higher sense of the divine is expressed, people feel that

this exalted Being dwells within all things. At such moments, their consciousness of God resembles that of a monotheistic faith—that there is only one God in the world.

From a biblical perspective, this is not strange. For the God who created heaven and earth has always spoken to humanity through nature—that is, through His creation (Romans 1:18ff). Humanity misunderstood this voice through creation and thought that God Himself resided in nature. But this is not a complete mistake. As I have often said, the Bible teaches that our God transcends all things, permeates all things, dwells within all things, and gathers all things into Himself. We, too, live our lives within this God.

Shinto, which lacks the concept of the Creator of heaven and earth, cannot comprehend this realm. In Japanese mythology, a creator god called *Ame-no-Minakanushi-no-Mikoto* appears only once—and then vanishes. The Japanese have cultivated a culture of gratefully receiving what already exists. In contrast, the Bible pursues the question of why things exist at all, and how they came to be.

Now then, how should we approach the Japanese, who possess such a dual—or two-layered—religious consciousness?

First of all, do not become adversarial. Do not engage in arguments. Whatever aspect of their dual consciousness they bring up, whether the higher or the lower, it is best to respond warmly: "Yes, indeed. In fact, the Bible, which we hold dear, also speaks of such things."

Second, without quarreling, continue the conversation in a friendly manner, while slowly introducing the teachings of Scripture. Then, gently fill in the incomplete, missing, or vague aspects of the Japanese sense of the divine with the truth of the Bible.

For those who are absorbed in the world of the eight million gods, it is good to say, "Ah, I see. That is very similar to the world described in the Bible." Avoid using harsh terms like "idolatry." Instead, kindly explain: "The only difference is that the Bible tells us that there is the Creator of all things—God Himself." You may even add, "The Japanese, too, are not entirely without such a sense, are they?" From there, if the conversation can move toward the exalted Being in heaven, all the better.

For those who possess the noble Shinto awareness of the transcendent, we can praise the greatness of such consciousness and then explain that, according to Scripture, the very source of that noble awareness is the God who created heaven and earth. How wonderful it would be if we could make that clear.

The Japanese people, or rather the Shinto spirit that expresses the Japanese soul, possess a strong sense of reverence for this "God-who-is-not-called-God." Yet, because they are so overwhelmed with awe for this Being who transcends the human world, they have ceased to think further about Him. In a way, that is admirable. For to dig inquisitively into the One they hold in the highest reverence would not merely be rude—it would be irreverent.

Indeed, Western Christianity has not escaped the charge of irreverence. After all, the Bible itself teaches, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."

And yet, the Bible also teaches us something else about this One. More than that, this exalted Being, out of love for humankind, draws near to us in order to have fellowship with us, even going so far as to introduce Himself. How marvelous it would be if we could emphasize that He is a God who loves humanity.

In the Japanese view, God is reduced to a deity who only watches over us from afar. But the God of the Bible is One who actively seeks to help humanity.

Therefore, let us trust God more and more in our daily lives. Let us experience ever more deeply His grace, His guidance, and His help, and respond with gratitude and praise. At the same time, let us speak boldly to those Japanese who still know nothing of this God, and share with them who He truly is.